

The Wrangle Over Strategy

by Louis J. Halle

On January 22, 1954, Secretary of State Dulles announced that the United States had adopted the strategy that has since become known by the name of "massive retaliation." This is a strategy of depending on the threat of destroying a potential aggressor's cities to deter him from aggression of any sort, including local aggression in places like Vietnam. The announcement aroused alarm and protest among our European allies, who saw themselves being incinerated in a nuclear holocaust that the United States had set off, unilaterally, in retribution for some minor aggression in a remote corner of the world.

On June 16, 1962, Secretary of Defense McNamara announced that the United States proposed to adopt, in place of massive retaliation, the contrary strategy that has since become known by the name of "controlled response." This is a strategy of responding to an aggression by means proportioned to its nature and its scale. A local aggression with small arms would, so to speak, be met locally, and with small arms; an aggression limited to military targets would be met by retaliation limited to military targets; and only an all-out nuclear aggression against cities would be met by all-out nuclear retaliation against cities. The announcement of this strategy, in its turn, aroused alarm and protest in the territory of our European allies, where it was said that in abandoning the strategy of massive retaliation the US was abandoning the defense of Europe, since the deterrence of Soviet aggression against Europe depended on the threat of massive retaliation.

One might dismiss the inconsistency between these two reactions by attributing it to the well-known cussedness of human nature. There is, however, more to the matter than that. While the arguments that are made against the strategy of controlled response are ostensibly strategic arguments, the considerations that motivate them are not necessarily strategic. If, then, we analyze the strategic debate, as I propose to do here (with some simplification), we may at last come down to realities that differ from the appearances.

We begin with the basic strategic considerations, which are paradoxical in that they involve mutually contradictory principles.

One principle is that, the more dangerous the resort to military aggression is made, the more a potential aggressor will be deterred from resorting to it. If we take account of this principle alone, we in the West ought to build a panoply of weapons that would almost

surely be fired in the case of any aggression and that would, say, destroy all life in the Northern Hemisphere, when they were fired.

Another principle, however, is that even the most extreme measures of deterrence cannot be guaranteed effective, if only because accidents occur and men behave irrationally. One must be prepared, then, for the contingency of war, and since the overriding objective in such a contingency would be the survival of civilization, one ought to prepare a strategy, and a weapons-system based upon it, that would not, for example, result in the destruction of all life in the Northern Hemisphere should war come in spite of deterrence.

Here, then, are two principles that go counter to each other, together confronting us with a dilemma: the more dangerous we make war the less likely it is to occur, but the worse it will be if it does occur.

Now for a third principle that stems from the second and supports it. The deterrent effect of a threat (according to our first principle) is great in proportion as the threat is terrible. But it is also great in proportion as the potential aggressor is convinced that, if he commits aggression, it will be carried out; and the more terrible the consequences of carrying it out would be, the less likely he is to be so convinced. (A potential aggressor, for example, might find it incredible that the United States would carry out a threat to destroy all life in the Northern Hemisphere in retaliation for the capture of a village in Vietnam—say Dien Bien Phu.) The first principle tells us that the deterrent effect is in direct proportion to the terribleness of the threat; the third that the deterrent effect is in inverse proportion to the terribleness of the threat; and both principles are valid.

Taking all three principles together, then, what we have is a dilemma in which we have to weigh contradictory considerations in order to arrive at a solution that must, at best, be unsatisfactory. Any solution responding to the first principle can be criticized on the basis of the other two; any solution responding to the other two can be criticized on the basis of the first.

This explains how the present debate can represent such contrary views. One European military officer of my acquaintance claims that abandonment of massive retaliation by the United States is virtually the abandonment of deterrence in Europe—a go-ahead signal to Moscow. Another says that the American shift to controlled response showed that Washington was preparing in all seriousness for the contingency of

actually fighting a war; while the continued Russian adherence to massive retaliation showed that Moscow, by contrast, had been discounting such a contingency. This officer believes that, in consequence, the American shift to controlled response has had a sobering and restraining effect on Moscow.

The United States and France

Since Secretary McNamara's announcement in June, 1962, the context of the strategic debate has, increasingly, been disagreement between the United States and France. To appreciate what lies behind it we must note that the strategy of controlled response is so expensive in its military requirements that only the richest nation on earth feels able to afford it. Nations less rich could meet only the costs of the lesser military requirements for a strategy of massive retaliation. Massive retaliation is limited in its requirements to a nuclear panoply made up of big warheads, and a delivery system accurate enough to land them on cities. Controlled response on the other hand, requires a whole range of weapons and weapons-systems: from non-nuclear (conventional) armament through tactical nuclear artillery to big nuclear warheads with means of delivery accurate enough to place them on enemy missiles in underground silos.

The present debate on strategy within the Western alliance may owe everything to the fact that France can afford an independent massive-retaliation strategy of her own, with its corresponding weapons-system, while only the United States (or the alliance as a whole in dependence on the United States) could afford the luxury of a controlled response strategy.

We may suspect, then, that France has not decided against controlled response because its abstract merits are less than those of massive retaliation. Perhaps she has been influenced by the fact that controlled response implies dependence on the United States, and consequent American predominance in the alliance, while massive retaliation can be made to support French independence. Americans, for their part, are open to the suspicion that they favor controlled response because it would assure the predominance of the United States over its allies.

Both sides in this debate resort to lawyers' arguments that tend to disguise the real issue. The spokesmen of today's France have adopted the argument that the United States, moved by concern for the preservation of its own cities, is simply abandoning the deterrence of aggression in Europe. France, therefore, must step into the breach with means of her own for the deterrence of aggression by the threat of massive retaliation that the United States is giving up.

Washington replies by alleging that a French capacity for massive retaliation cannot deter aggression in Eu-

rope because the threat that it poses would, in its realization, almost surely entail the destruction of France, and such a threat cannot carry conviction. In this view, which I share, it is almost impossible to imagine, realistically, the contingency in which the government of France would invite the destruction of France by giving its small *force de frappe* the order to attack the cities of the Soviet Union.

Be it noted that the purely strategic argument for a French strategy of massive retaliation is substantially weaker than the argument for an American strategy of massive retaliation (weak as it was) put forward by Mr. Dulles a decade ago; for France in 1964 is vulnerable to counter-retaliation as the United States in 1954 was not. The argument is, in fact, so weak that French spokesmen who put it forward in public do not themselves, in private, give it much credence.

The argument they make in private is somewhat different. By possessing its own independent means of massive retaliation, they say, France can deny to the United States the option of giving up massive retaliation in favor of controlled response. By denying it this option, France adds the threat of massive American retaliation to her own minuscule deterrent threat, whether the United States likes it or not.

How?

At this point the argument becomes tenuous, and I can only express my surprise at what seems to be its universal acceptance. It is that, since the United States would immediately and automatically be involved in any nuclear war in which cities were targets, the United States would have to fight this kind of war if France decided to start it. In a word, with her *force de frappe* France could at any time "trigger off" massive retaliation (or pose the imminent threat of massive retaliation) by the United States. The President of France, using the independent French deterrent, would have virtually the same power as the President of the United States to detonate the American deterrent.

What reason is there to believe that by firing her own *force de frappe* France could, in fact, "trigger off" the American nuclear panoply? I suppose that, as the possibility of such an action by France became vivid, the United States would take steps to make clear its own total dissociation from what France was threatening to do. In case the French threat was carried out nevertheless, I would expect the President of the United States to take up the telephone connecting the White House with the Kremlin in order to inform the Soviet Prime Minister that, since France was acting independently, the United States intended to keep its own forces in leash unless attacked by Soviet forces. This seems to me at least as likely as that the President would simply push the button the minute after it had been pushed in France, or even that he would phone the Soviet Prime Minister to tell him that the United

States would retaliate on Russia for any Russian retaliation on France.

Even the private arguments for the French deterrent, then, if they are followed out, end by going beyond the bounds of what makes sense. Since intelligent persons advance them, however, we must assume that there is sense of some sort behind them, even if hidden. We must ask, at last, what they are really about.

The answer to which this has been leading is that the real issue is not strategic at all. The real issue is that of nationalism *vs* supranationalism. Those who advocate an alliance strategy of controlled response assume that the old-fashioned nation-state, which enjoys a sovereign independence based on autonomous means of self-defense, even when it is less than continental in its dimensions, has been made obsolete by modern technology. Those who assume that the independent nation-state must remain favor a strategy of massive retaliation because the alternative strategy is not within its means. Moreover, even though a national capacity for massive retaliation should be militarily unusable and ineffective as a deterrent, it has an indispensable symbolic value. France's *force de frappe* is like an expensive sword by one's side: whether usable or not, it is the token of rank in the wearer. It gives him prestige, it gains him *entrée* into the highest circles.

This is the issue, and certain human considerations are heavily involved in it. An American enjoys the advantage (which also makes him suspect) that he can advocate the supranational community as the basic self-defensible unit with the knowledge that the United States would be the leader of such a community and would dominate it. He can advocate such supranationalism without sacrificing his nationalism. A Frenchman, however, sees France becoming a satellite of the United States in such a community; and everyone who is anti-American anywhere is impelled to oppose a strategy that would assure American dominance, even though it was distinctly the best strategy. The American strategic argument can hardly be judged on its merit since it incidentally calls for the subordination of other nationalities to the American. This has prompted many Europeans to claim that controlled response is merely a conspiratorial device for assuring the hegemony of the Americans — a charge hard to answer, although, as Lord Gladwyn has observed, "the imperial crown would sit heavily on their weary head."

Transition to Supranationalism

Having defined the real issue in these terms, what conclusion should we come to?

My own conclusion is based on a distinction between the short run and the long. The sovereign nation-state, as it comes down to us from the Nineteenth Century, has proved increasingly inadequate in the

Twentieth. The old conception of national communities, each containing within its own boundaries all the essential means for its survival, each containing its own independent means of self-defense, has at last become totally and conspicuously unworkable. Nevertheless, national communities that represent this conception are what we have with us today, and what we have with us today is what we have to work with today, whether we like it or not.

In the short run, then, we have to take the sovereign nation-state as given. We have to make do as best we can with its inadequacies. We Americans, furthermore, have to accept the fact that the diminution in the intensity of the Cold War, which bound our allies to us by a common fear, is today moving them to reassert their national independence. They will not readily accept, therefore, the implications of a strategy that requires them to make sacrifices in order to supply, so to speak, the infantry for a single, supranational military complex that is, essentially, under our control and to which we contribute the nuclear component. The French, at least, will advance any arguments against this, however irrational.

The short run, however, is unlikely to be long. The unworkability of the sovereign nation-state (where it is not also a superstate) has become so obvious that when its chief spokesman, General de Gaulle, makes the argument for it he has to do so ambiguously, in terms that hardly hide its contradictions. (The present situation, he says, "simultaneously justifies alliance and independence. . . . To have allies goes without saying [but one must also] have the free disposition of oneself.") The sovereign nation-state, because it is conspicuously failing to meet the test of workability, is clearly on the way out. In Europe, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Southeast Asia, radical expedients are being tried to build ever-closer association of nation-states. Under the daily chaos of pressures and counterpressures, supranational communities are forming that must necessarily take the place of their component states as the basic political (and military) units of mankind. This development may at last produce a united Western Europe, it may produce a united Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, it may produce a Europe that is simply France "writ large," it may produce a single Atlantic community, or it may produce all of these in their varying relationships and degrees. Whatever the new forms will prove to be, as they emerge they will radically alter the strategic problem and establish new terms for its solution. Of one thing only may we be sure: that the rapid development we are witnessing today cannot turn about and go back toward the nation-state of the Nineteenth Century with its sovereign capacity to insure its own self-defense.

As always, then, we have to rely on time as the only solvent.